

Colleges Scotland's Response to the Scottish Funding Council's Consultation on Rural and Remoteness Funding

1. Introduction

Colleges Scotland is the collective voice for the college sector in Scotland, representing its interests with the aim that colleges are at the heart of a world class education sector that is recognised, valued and available to all. Colleges Scotland, as the membership body, represents all 26 colleges, which deliver both further education and around 28% of all higher education in Scotland.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Funding Council's (SFC) consultation on rural and remoteness funding. In bringing together its response, Colleges Scotland consulted with the college sector to gather perspectives for this submission.

2. General Comments

Colleges Scotland recognises that there are additional costs associated with colleges operating in remote (including sparsely populated), rural and island areas of Scotland. The rural and remoteness funding allocated to colleges recognises the additional costs that they necessarily incur.

We acknowledge that colleges, operating in smaller campuses in such areas, want to offer a reasonably broad curriculum in rural and remote areas. The additional costs relate mainly to:

- college size – not able to make economies of scale
- small class sizes
- multi-campus operation
- staff travel to deliver provision in remote areas (as opposed to student travel which should be covered by student support funds).

It is also worth highlighting that there are a number of additional circumstances that present funding challenges to rural colleges that are often not taken into account. These include:

- recruiting and appointing staff, including interview expenses and relocation allowances
- developing, deploying and maintaining ICT technologies
- employee engagement (often dispersed)
- engagement and interaction with small and medium-sized enterprises (SME's).

Colleges Scotland is of the view that there is a need for colleges who have campuses in rural and remote areas to receive additional funding to ensure that students – so far as possible – have access to the same range and quality of college provision across Scotland.

3. Qualification for Rural Funding

Colleges Scotland supports the basis on which the SFC is proposing to decide which regions will qualify for rural and remoteness funding.

We believe that the strong regional focus of the proposed eligibility criteria should help to ensure that students in rural areas have access to the same range and quality of college provision as their

counterparts in urban areas. We also support the SFC's proposal to not simply use rurality on its own as a criterion for the longer-term provision of funding, rather also taking into account how a college serves the rural area.

We agree that there is a need for a clear and transparent methodology for identifying and supporting provision in regions which are rural and remote. Any methodology must ensure that funding is applied fairly and consistently, and focus on colleges that deliver a significant proportion of their curriculum to students in rural and remote areas.

4. Outcome Agreement Process

Colleges Scotland supports the proposal that rural and remoteness funding will be delivered through the Outcome Agreements process. We believe that this will help ensure that funding will be driven by an agreement on meeting the needs of rural and remote communities.

We recognise that the proposed rural and remoteness funding mechanisms will place an onus on colleges within a region to assess and evaluate the impact of the funding provided, and demonstrate through the Outcome Agreement process how they are enabling students in rural and remote areas to access the same range and quality of college provision as their counterparts in urban areas.

However, we believe it is important to highlight that the SFC must continue to be mindful of the complexity of challenges faced by colleges in rural and remote regions in relation to economies of scale, small class sizes, multi-campus operations and staff travel.

5. Future Levels of Funding

Colleges Scotland supports the proposal that future rural and remoteness funding – including adjustments up and down – should be linked to continued delivery to the areas the college or region serves, demonstrated through the outcome agreement process. We are of the view that the Outcome Agreement process would also become the way in which an evidence-based discussion would take place in relation to levels of support in future.

We continue to be in favour of a strong regional focus when identifying eligibility for support, as it is critical to ensure that resources are effectively directed to the areas of most need.

A simple, transparent approach which takes account of the key indicators of rurality and remoteness, the proportionate impact of the rural and remoteness cost drivers, and the significance of this funding stream to the on-going financial sustainability of colleges delivering high levels of provision to rural and remote learners. It is acknowledged that this could involve a period of transition related to funding levels.

We would be keen to ensure that, in instances where colleges continue to receive rural and remoteness funding based on historical or specific arrangements, the rationale and process around those funding allocations remains clear and transparent to ensure equity across the sector. We would also wish to understand the impact of this on the overall amount and resources available under rural and remoteness funding.

6. Conclusion

In summary, Colleges Scotland broadly supports the principles that have been proposed as a basis for rural and remoteness funding.

There are a range of additional costs associated with operating colleges in remote (including sparsely populated), rural and island areas of Scotland. The rural and remoteness funding allocated to colleges should reflect the additional costs that colleges necessarily incur.

We recognise that the strong regional focus of the proposed eligibility criteria should help to ensure that students in rural areas have access to the same range and quality of college provision as their counterparts in urban areas.

We welcome the SFC's simplified approach to the allocation of rural and remoteness funding and support the proposal that rural and remoteness funding will be delivered through the outcome agreements process.

Going forward, we are in favour of the continuation of a strong regional focus when identifying eligibility for support – it is critical to ensure that resources are effectively directed to the areas of most need in a clear and transparent way.

As the representative body for the college sector, we look forward to further engaging with the SFC in due course in relation to rural and remoteness funding for colleges.

Colleges Scotland
November 2017